**IMAGINE**

May 17, and May 18th, 2025

Rev. Christine E. Burns

Fifth Sunday of Easter

*3And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”* Revelation 21:3-6

Today I want to invite you to look at the cover of your bulletin and **imagine …**

The image of Imagine from Central Park in New York City. Strawberry Fields is a memorial to the British rock musician and peace activist John Lennon (1940-1980). The memorial consists of a five-acre landscape near the West 72nd Street entrance and includes the *Imagine* mosaic, where many come to pay tribute to Lennon. The memorial’s name is a reference to the 1967 song Lennon wrote and performed with the Beatles, “Strawberry Fields Forever.”1

Imagine.

Close your eyes if you will and listen to the words of the simple, almost nursery-like lyrics of “Imagine” composed by John Lennon and Yoko Ono. Allow the lyrics to float in your mind like strawberry fields and marshmallow clouds. This is an invitation into a world of imagination.

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us, only sky

Imagine all the people
Livin' for today
Ah

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too

Imagine all the people
Livin' life in peace
You

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world
You

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one[[1]](#footnote-1)

Open your eyes if you wish.

*And now*, let me invite you into one of the most spectacular interviews I have been privileged to conduct in my lifetime.

Saturday morning, I was walking in the woods with my dog, and my longtime friend and dog walking pal, Dan Fornari. I told him of my search to understand Imagine for today’s sermon. He said, would you like to speak to my friend Phil Galdston. I have met Phil once at the Fornari’s Garden party and of course, I said yes.

## Phil is the Director of Songwriting, Music Professor of Songwriting

### [**Music and Performing Arts Professions**](https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/departments/music-and-performing-arts-professions) at New York University and one of Dan’s closest friends. Phil graciously gave me a 25-minute interview on the history and recording importance of “Imagine”, Lennon, the Beatles and Yoko Ono. Wow, God showed up in a big way today. She’s like that some days.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Phil began by telling the origin story of Yoko Ono and John Lennon. Ono was an accomplished conceptual artist in London and the two met at a gallery where her art was on exhibit. Ono was on a ladder climbing up to a piece of art that said “Yes” when John saw her. Lennon was married. Ono divorced. Lennon quickly separated from his wife to be with Ono, and soon after the Beatles as a band parted way.

 The origin story of the song “Imagine” comes from Ono and Lennon’s collaborative work as advocates for peace. They took out a full-page ad in the New York Times that said, “War is Over, If You Want It.” The two paid for a billboard in Times Square with the same message. Soon afterwards they had a Bed-In for Peace in Canada and recorded an album from bed.

 The recording of the Beatles is critical to understanding the evolution of music. The Beatles were the first to Imagine the studios as a creative space rather than a mere space to record sound. After discovering the possibility of creating art in studio they used the recording studio to record Strawberry Fields and Penny Lane. The Beatles stopped touring in August of 1966 after their last American tour in San Francisco. George Harrison hated touring.

 They retreated to the studio in 1966 and recorded Strawberry Fields by Lennon and Penny Lane by Harrison. At that point they were mainly recording and had stopped touring.

Sargent Pepper was the result of their collaboration in the recording studio. British pop media speculated that the band had broken up, but they were creating art in the studio.

In June of 1967, they created their most important pop music after they had retreated from the stadiums into the studio.

The Get Back Album was created and then shelved, and Abbey Road was their final recorded album.

Phil Specter, an American recording studio producer, took the Get Back tapes and worked on them alone and released “Let It Be.”

Lennon and Harrison both worked with Specter to produce their solo albums.

Eventually Lennon released “Imagine.”

The song is very basic, simple.

Lennon rejected the polish of high studio recording and chose to sing and play piano with a simple accompaniment behind him of drums and strings in a live recording.

According to Prof. Galdston, part of the appeal of “Imagine” is that it is so simple.

In its simplicity led to a nursery-like quality of sound.

What is fascinating about the reach of this song is that it is embraced world-wide.

Phil noted:

“Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too”

Is a “very Jesus-like statement.” And it has been used in Democratic political conventions, notably in the 1980’s, with Dionne Warwick singing “Imagine” with the lines mentioned above omitted in the song.

Prof. Galdston, insisted, that Lennon’s famous quote regarding the fame of the Beatles that “We are bigger than Jesus.” was his way of saying it was ridiculous that a pop singer is bigger than Jesus.

And the words: “no religion” too are being used to illuminate the way religions have been misused and corrupted from how we are supposed to treat one another.

The Russian Lennon, who Phil refers to as the “other Lennon,” famously said “Religion is the opiate of the masses.”

He rejects that limited understanding of what John Lennon was writing about.

John Lennon’s origin story began in 1940 in Liverpool, England. He was born to Julian and Fred Lennon. Liverpool was under constant bombing in WWII as it was one of the major ports. His father, Fred, went off to sea and abandoned the family. His mother Julia, struggling to stay afloat financially and emotionally, had her sister raise Lennon as her own child. John was told that Julia was his aunt.

She visited often and played the banjo. When Lennon was 10, he discovered that his aunt Julia was really his mother. Oh, what sorrow. After playing with him one day, he watched her pedal off on her bike and die after she was hit by a bus.

This sorrow led John Lennon to carry a sadness and a hard edge and bitterness to his work and music.

“Julia” a song about his mother on the White Album tells a little of his pain. Lennon used primal therapy to discover that the core of his pain was around his mother and witnessing her death. One line in the song “*Mother you had me/and I never had you”* captures a fragment of that pain.

And yet, John Lennon evolved as he grew and with the birth of his second child, he softened.

He evolved; and the lives of the Beatles evolved. John Lennon noted that the Beatles never knew the ways that they would impact the world.

To come full circle, Prof. Galdston informed me, Yoko Ono, one of the creators and authors of “Imagine” determined that there should be a shrine to such an important person in the center of capitalism, NYC, in Central Park; Strawberry Fields was created under her direction. She invited people from around the globe to send flowers and plants to surround the grounds of Strawberry Fields and if you go to Strawberry Fields Park in Central Park, there are always people of all countries, languages, religions singing together Beatles songs. Everyone is welcome to the people’s Park, and everyone is invited to Imagine.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Today’s scripture reading from the Revelation to John, a man of Jewish origin suggesting that he was a native of Palestine who emigrated to Asia Minor, perhaps in the wake of the first Jewish revolt against Rome (66-73 C.E.) was written by John a prophet and who is writing to the seven other struggling Christian communities. It is known as “apocalyptic” literature because it speaks of the end times. And it is a “revelation.” Jewish apocalypses reflect a sharp distinction between the present evil age and the imminent future of blessing. The only other book-length “apocalypse” is the Book of Daniel.

Our reading comes from the end of Revelations, the closing argument of a new heaven and a new earth. A time when “God will dwell with them as their God; and they shall be his peoples, and God himself will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying will be no more, for the first things have been passed away.” Rev. 21: 3-4.

“Imagine” invites us to sing of this new hope now. To dream dreams. To clear our eyes. To work for peace. To lie in bed and record albums. To see the power in complexity and then slow it down and see the power in raw live recordings with voice and piano, drums and some strings. To imagine living life in peace.

You may say I am a dreamer.

I hope I am not the only one.

Christ only has our hands, our feet.

The global world needs us all to do our part.

And we, and me, I need to dream and sing to stay alive all while paddling like a duck. On the surface its smooth, underneath the water’s tension, I’m paddling like a duck to move forward.

Paddle on. Do your part. Sing your song. You, you are the only one who can sing that note.

But you alone cannot do it.

We all must become dreamers and doers. Singers and creators.

Blessings my friends. And God will wipe away every tear. “Death will be no more; mourning and crying will be no more, for the first things have been passed away.” Rev. 21: 3-4.

1. <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/people/phil-galdston> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Notes taken from phone interview with Prof. Phil Gladston on May 17, 2025. Cape Cod, MA [↑](#footnote-ref-3)